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# Submission – Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

## Missed opportunities in the Pacific Islands

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# The Pacific Islands matter to Australia<sup>1</sup>

Since before Federation, Australia has been anxious about its proximity to the Pacific Islands, the region's vulnerability to penetration by potentially hostile powers, and its distance from its major security allies (first the United Kingdom, later the United States).

Accordingly, Australia has had (and continues to have) two primary strategic interests in the Pacific Islands:

- First, to ensure that no power hostile to Western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which it could launch attacks on Australia or threaten allied access or its maritime approaches.<sup>2</sup> To achieve this, Australia has sought to be the region's 'principal security partner'.<sup>3</sup>
- Second, to ensure 'security, stability and cohesion' in the region,<sup>4</sup> as instability is perceived to leave Pacific Island states vulnerable to hostile powers.

Australia also has significant economic interests in the region; thousands of Australians live there, and many more visit each year.

The Pacific Islands matter to Australia and **Australian broadcasting services should play a key role in advancing our security in the region.**

## The Pacific Islands are a growing security concern

Australia faces an increasingly uncertain, and potentially perilous, security situation in the Asia–Pacific, and that's likely to reverberate in the Pacific Islands.

The main issue is the increased activism of external powers, particularly China, although Russia has also made recent forays. India and Japan have also stepped-up their involvement.

China's presence in the Pacific Islands has escalated over the last decade. While this has attracted comment from those interested in the region, the issue was brought to the public's attention by the alarmist April 2018 report that the Luganville wharf in Vanuatu, in which China has invested, could be converted into a naval base.<sup>5</sup>

Although this report was denied by both the Vanuatu and Chinese governments,<sup>6</sup> China's presence in Vanuatu has received continued public attention via a report on 60 Minutes

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<sup>1</sup> This submission is based on my forthcoming book, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2016, para. 3.7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 3.21.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2013, para 1.21.

<sup>5</sup> David Wroe, 'China eyes Vanuatu military base in plan with global ramifications', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-eyes-vanuatu-military-base-in-plan-with-global-ramifications-20180409-p4z8j9.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Smee and Dan McGarry, 'Impossible: China denies planning military base in Vanuatu', *The Guardian*, 10 April 2018, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/10/concerns-china-in-talks-with-vanuatu-about-south-pacific-military-base?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/10/concerns-china-in-talks-with-vanuatu-about-south-pacific-military-base?CMP=share_btn_tw).

which claimed that, should Vanuatu be unable to service its debts, China may take the wharf or other territory as payment.<sup>7</sup>

Most respected Australian commentators have treated these claims with scepticism.<sup>8</sup> They rightly point out that China does not presently pose an overt threat to Australia, nor does China appear to have a policy of establishing a military presence in the region.

But, there remains the risk that China or another power with interests inimical to ours will establish a military presence in the Pacific Islands. One only needs to consider how far the Japanese advanced through the Pacific Islands during the Second World War to see what serious strategic consequences this could have for Australia. To help avoid this, **Australia needs to do more to ensure that it remains the principal security partner of Pacific Island states.**

## **Australian broadcasting services can enhance our security**

**Australian broadcasting services in the Pacific Islands offer an important opportunity for Australia to advance its relationships with Pacific Island states and their peoples.**

Despite this, budget cuts have seen Australian broadcasting dramatically scaled-back, including the end of shortwave broadcasting in January 2017. These broadcasts represented an important way for Australia to reach millions of Pacific Islanders and aided public discourse and debate in the region. The ABC's shortwave broadcasts were also the widest reaching and most effective emergency messaging system in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Australia's decision was self-defeating; in our absence, China uses our former frequencies, and, as we are the main humanitarian and disaster responder to the region, we have lost access to an important emergency broadcasting capability.

**Australian broadcasting services to the Pacific Islands can play a vital role in enhancing Australia's security.** Wide-reaching and accessible Australian broadcasting services can ensure that Australia reaches millions of Pacific Islanders across this vital region. It can also play an important role in providing an emergency broadcasting capability that reduces the impact of natural disasters by giving affected populations time to prepare and respond, and facilitates the delivery of humanitarian and disaster relief.

The dramatic scaling-back of Australian broadcasting services in the Pacific Islands is a missed opportunity to enhance Australia's security. Because of this scaling-back, Australia is now less safe; all for a saving of a comparatively small amount of money. Therefore, **Australian broadcasting services to the Pacific Islands need to be immediately restored and expanded in order to enhance our security.**

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<sup>7</sup> 'The China Syndrome', *60 Minutes Australia*, Channel 9, 17 June 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Graeme Smith, 'In Vanuatu, it's he says, Xi says', *Inside Story*, 13 April 2018, <http://insidestory.org.au/in-vanuatu-its-he-says-xi-says/>; Matthew Dornan, 'Australia's Pacific Island Myopia', *The Diplomat*, 13 July 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/australias-pacific-island-myopia/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jemima Garrett, 'The time is right for a 'step-up' in ABC broadcasting to the Pacific', *DevPolicy*, 9 July 2018, <http://www.devpolicy.org/the-time-is-right-for-a-step-up-in-abc-broadcasting-to-the-pacific-20180709/>.